

## Disputation Poems in Medieval Hebrew Literature in Spain

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Hebrew literature in Spain begins around the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE, when the Jews started to participate in the intellectual and artistic *risorgimento* promoted by the Caliphs of Córdoba Abderraman III and Hakam II. Jewish communities quickly adopted Arabic language and culture; at the same time, a renewed interest was stirred in the study of the Hebrew language and in its use for the artistic expression par excellence: poetry. One Dunas ben Labrat, who settled in Cordoba around 950, is reputed to be the first who used the models, literary conventions, and quantitative meter of Arabic poetry in Hebrew.

However, Spanish Hebrew poetry reached its highest peaks two centuries later, during the 11<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, during the period of the independent “Taifa” kingdoms and the Almoravid conquest. After the Almohad conquest of Spain, in the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century, many Jews fled into exile to the Christian kingdoms in the North; this period sees the emergence and flourishing of Spanish Hebrew narrative, which is also based on Arabic models. Most of the Spanish Hebrew narrative works produced from the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century until the 15<sup>th</sup> century follow the form and style of the Arabic *maqāma*, composed in rhymed prose with intercalated poems.<sup>1</sup> The peculiarity of Spanish Hebrew literature lies mainly in its frequent quotations from the Bible and from Rabbinical literature, wherein lies its originality, in spite of its stylistic and formal dependence of the Spanish Arabic literature.

The debate is undoubtedly a minor genre among the literary works cultivated by Hispanic authors during the Middle Ages. As such, we find it, with very few exceptions, always embedded into works of narrative character, especially in collections of *maqāmas* or stories. It is therefore no surprise that the study of the Spanish Hebrew debates has not sparked a great deal of interest among researchers. I first started to work on these texts some twenty-five years ago,<sup>2</sup> fascinated by the topics and treatment that literary debates had in the three cultures that coexisted in the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages.

Already in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Menéndez Pidal stated that “the dispute as a framework to develop a literary theme” is a genre common to all literatures.<sup>3</sup> In the Middle Ages, debates were composed in Latin (*disputatio*), in Romance languages (*tenso*, *disputa*, and *partiment*), in Arabic

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Schippers 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Alba Cecilia 1993, *ead.*1997, and *ead.* 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Menéndez Pidal 1948: 13. See, more recently, Reinink & Vanstiphout 1991: 1.

(*mufākhara*), and in Hebrew (*milhemet, vikuah*).<sup>4</sup> Literary debates or dialogues between two contenders who defend opposing points of view is, therefore, a widespread genre in the Middle Ages. The reason is probably that it offers a pleasant way of teaching, and represents a poetic-rhetorical device for poets to exert their skills in praising and vituperating the same matter, or one thing and its opposite. These debates or disputes could be held between different types of rivals, such as people of different gender, age, and social status (e.g. clergyman, poet, scribe, soldier, warrior, man and woman, young and old, and master and pupil), as well as objects that represent them (e.g. pen, blade, scissors). Debates between concepts and allegorical entities also exist (e.g. wealth and wisdom, vice and virtue, soul and body, intellect and heart), as well as between animals or plants and between personified inanimate entities (e.g. day and evening, wine and water, summer and winter).

From a literary point of view, these debates use both prose and rhyme, are usually written as a dialogue and often feature, in addition to the litigants, a judge who is knowledgeable in the subject under debate, and who settles the question by making one of the contenders the winner. From the point of view of their contents, the issues covered are varied, but by far the most common categories in the Middle Ages are the following:

1. Debates of body and soul, or of heart and soul, or other members of the body.
2. Discussions of arms and letters, sometimes represented by a clergyman and a soldier, or by a sword and pen.
3. Debates of wine and water, of summer and winter, of night and day, of wealth and wisdom, etc.

## I. Disputations in Medieval Spanish-language literature

In medieval literature in Spanish language there are debates belonging to each of the three thematic categories outlined. I will refer to them only very briefly as a way of contextualizing their Hebrew counterparts:

1. Debate between Body and Soul.<sup>5</sup> The oldest version of a debate between the Body and the Soul in Spanish dates to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> It consists of 37 couplets, and is inspired by the French poem *Débat du Corps et de l'Âme*,<sup>7</sup> which is in turn probably a version of the Latin poem *Rixa animae et corporis*. It contains a discussion in which the soul and body of a

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<sup>4</sup> See the contributions to sections III and IV of the present volume.

<sup>5</sup> García Solalinde 1933.

<sup>6</sup> Franchini 2001: 23-42 and 215-217.

<sup>7</sup> Batioukhof 1891, Kastner 1905, and Franchini 2001: 40-42.

deceased person blame each other for his sins. This theme became widespread in all languages,<sup>8</sup> and different versions of it are known in Spanish literature.<sup>9</sup>

2. Debate between Arms and Letters, or between the Knight and Clergyman, it is represented by *Dispute between Elena and María*,<sup>10</sup> written in 1280 by an author who, judging from the words he uses, must have hailed from León, Zamora, or Salamanca. This text presents a dispute between two noble sisters: María, mistress of an abbot, and Elena, lover of a knight. Each one sets forth the advantages of one's life and the disadvantages of the other's life. Their arguments are based on material considerations, such as the quiet and easy life of the clergy against the harsh and uncertain one of the knight. The two sisters engage in an intense and virulent dialogue, in which they once and again present arguments for and against their beloved ones.

The tone of the discussion rises and it turns into insults. The sisters cannot agree, so they decide to take their case to court of king Oriol, "great judge of cases of love," to settle the issue. The manuscript breaks when they are presenting their arguments, so the outcome is unknown.<sup>11</sup>

3. The debate between water and wine is a topic often found in medieval literature; *Los denuestos del agua y el vino* ("The insults between water and wine") can be dated to the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. This debate has parallels in French and Latin debates.<sup>12</sup> In the Spanish version, water and wine discuss on their respective benefits and mock the enemy's defects. The dispute ends jokingly when both contenders ask for wine to drink.

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<sup>8</sup> An extensive bibliography on the topic can be found in the article by Bossy 1976.

<sup>9</sup> The theme reappears in the allegorical-Dantesque school (end of 16<sup>th</sup> century) with the title *Revelación de un ermitaño* ("Revelation of a hermit," see Franchini 2001: 133-150 and ###); it influences the *Farsa racional del libre albedrío en que se representa la batalla que hay entre el espíritu y la carne* ("Rational farce of free will in which the battle between spirit and flesh is represented," see Franchini: 2001 ###) and reaches down to Calderón's time, who uses it in one of his "sacramental plays" of his first phase, entitled *El pleito matrimonial del cuerpo y el alma* ("The marriage lawsuit of body and soul"), see Alborg 1972: I, 100

<sup>10</sup> The work is published, with a comprehensive study, by Menéndez Pidal 1914. Cf. also Menéndez Pidal 1948, Alvar 1974: 159-177, and Franchini 2001: 95-122 and ###.

<sup>11</sup> Several versions of this debate are known in European literature; it was also picked up by Latin literature, sometimes in blatantly satirical poems; others, in a more measured and courteous manner: see Tavani 1964.

<sup>12</sup> The Castilian text forms a whole together with *Razón de Amor*. Menéndez Pidal 1919 offers an edition of the work. Other editions can be found in Alvar 1974: 141-157 and Franchini 2001: 43-80 and 219-225. On other debates between water and wine, see Hanford 1913 and McFie 1981.

## II. Types of debates in the Hebrew Hispanic literature

Although traditional Jewish literature could have provided models to medieval Hebrew authors,<sup>13</sup> their immediate models were Arabic. From Arabic literature they borrow their aesthetic and formal patterns, and its various religious and secular themes.

The influence of genres, themes and motifs of Andalusian Arabic literature started to leave its imprint on Hispanic Hebrew poetry during the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards. During this period several renowned Hebrew poets, such as Shemuel ha-Nagid, Yosef Ibn Hasday, Solomon ibn Gabirol, Mose ibn Ezra, and Yehuda ha-Levi, borrowed some of motifs from Spanish Arabic poetry that can be considered forerunners to the debates. For instance, the praise of the pen and its qualities is one of the favorite and most frequent motifs both in laudatory poems and in poetic riddles.

In the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century, after the Almohads had taken control of most cities of Al-Andalus, large groups of Jewish population emigrate to Christian kingdoms in the north. Consequently, cities like Toledo, Zaragoza, and Barcelona become the new Jewish cultural centers. A feature of this new phase of Jewish literature is the rise of Hispanic Hebrew narrative, which also follows the general features of Arabic narrative. The literary genre of the debate, either independent or included in larger works, reaches its zenith in this period. The form of expression it adopts is the *maqāma*, which, as stated above, consists of alternating rhymed prose and verse.

In the following, I will adopt the tripartite typology exposed above to present the main themes and authors of Hispanic Hebrew literature: first, I will speak about the debates between body and soul; then on the debates between arms and letters; and in the third place on debates on other topics.

### II.1 Debates between body and soul

**1.1.** The oldest Spanish Hebrew debate is probably the one composed by the poet and philosopher Selomo ibn Gabirol (Málaga? ca. 1022 – Valencia? ca. 1058).<sup>14</sup> The debate presents a disputation between the soul and the body, who mutually accuse each other of being the cause of man's sins. The disputation is part of a larger religious poem of clear neo-Platonic influence, which consists of 34 verses divided into three hemistiches each and contains the following sections:

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<sup>13</sup> For example, the book of Job, in which the protagonist's friends speak alternately in a debate of high theological content about divine justice, reward and punishment, sin, etc. Also, some discussions appear sporadically in Rabbinic literature, such as disputes between the mountains for God to deliver the Law on them, or between the letters Hebrew that appear before God asking Him for the world to be created by them, among others. See van Bekkum 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Yarden 1971: vol. I, no. 20, 31-34.

*Verses 1-7:* Introduction: the poet reflects on the day of his death, when soul and body are required to submit to the trial of their Creator (v. 5) and feels terrified for his sins.

*[...] Terror overwhelmed me  
           When I thought of the day of (my) death  
                     And I trembled with fear.  
 [...] Day of devastation for the wicked  
           Whom for his sins is summoned  
                     And examined by his Creator.  
 [...] When the Soul together with the Body  
           Appear to be condemned.*

*Verses 8-19:* The soul begins its plea: it pleads not guilty (v. 8) and declares itself a victim, since it has spent his life locked up in a dark prison (v. 10), inhabiting a corpse (v. 11), a body that has caused it to commit all kinds of sins (lust, gluttony) and which, therefore, deserves to be punished (v. 18).

*I am tired of the body's filth,  
           I want to escape  
                     The foul stench of the corpse,  
 [...] (The body) gets into every sin  
           And drags me (into it) by force,  
 [...] He is tied to all lust,  
           And never stops eating and drinking.*

*Verses 20-28:* The body speaks up: it declares itself innocent. It argues that, without the soul, it is worth nothing, it is like a house without an owner, a sterile being, like a rolling stone or the shoots of the vine (v. 22). It is, in sum, as innocent or as guilty as the soul is, and it is the soul who should be judged for the body's actions.

*[...] I too am deprived of children  
           Like the shoots of the vine,  
                     Which are useless;  
 Without a soul, I am  
           Like a house without its owner  
 [...] Remove, my soul, your bitterness,  
           And eat the fruits of your actions,  
                     "And pay your debts." (2 Kings 4:7)  
 I have no evil desires,  
           Since I am just like you –  
                     "How can you say: 'I am not defiled'?" (Je 2:23)*

*Verses 29-30:* A new character appears offstage: it is the poet himself who describe the despair of body and soul, both doomed to be united forever.

*They are dejected beings who agitate  
and find no reconciliation  
“joined one to another” (Job 41:17)  
[...] both are forever bound to each other –  
“both will burn together” (Is 1:31)*

Verses 31-34: The poem ends with a penitential prayer in which the deceased person (the poet, again) begs for compassion and forgiveness from the Supreme Judge.

*The arrogant loves arrogance  
“If you kept a record of sins,  
Lord, who could stand?” (Palm 130:3)  
Sooth your fearful anger [...]  
“so that your maid’s son may be refreshed” (Ex 23:12)  
Have mercy on me,  
and on the day of judgment,  
do not punish me in your anger.*

**1.2.** Yehudah al Harizi (ca. 1170-1230) is the main responsible for the introduction of the *maqāma* in Spanish Hebrew literature: he was an expert in Arabic literature and had previously translated Al-Hariri’s *maqāmas* into Hebrew.<sup>15</sup> He himself composed a collection of *maqāmas* entitled *Sefer Taḥkemoni* (“Book of the Sages”),<sup>16</sup> which includes the largest collection of Hispanic Hebrew debates. Many topics are covered; in many cases, the debate is a literary joust in which poets praise the most diverse and colourful things, such as ants and fleas.<sup>17</sup> All the debates are embedded within the framework of a fictional trip to the East undertaken by the two main characters: Heman the Ezraḥite (the narrator) and Ḥever the Kenite (his friend, an enlightened tramp). The collection is composed in the *maqāma*-format, in which rhymed prose and metric poems alternate.

Chapter XIII of the work contains a “Dialogue between Soul and Body, Intellect and Desire.”<sup>18</sup> Ḥever the Kenite introduces this “dialogue” at the request of his partner as a “pleasant story” and places it in the Day of Judgment, a day of terror for sinners, in which body and soul will together stand before God. The insults that the two contenders hurl at each other follow very closely the model of the poem of Ibn Gabirol. However, Al Harizi further complicates the story by introducing two new characters: Intellect, who encourages the soul to be purified and cleansed of

<sup>15</sup> Schippers 2002: 305-306.

<sup>16</sup> Translations in del Valle 1988 and Segal 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Thus, in chapter 4, “The ant and the flea”, two poets appear before a judge to decide which of the two is better and, to that effect, they challenge each other to compose poems in praise of these insects. Something similar occurs in the next chapter, in which twelve poets have to praise one month each. Chapters 12 and 42 contain disputes between greed and generosity; chapter 17 is a dispute between a non-believer (karaite) and a believer (Rabbanite). Chapter 39 presents a dispute between day and night; chapter 40, between the sword and the pen; chapter 41, between a man and a woman “on who offers more for the world and its fire”; chapter 43, between the sea and the land.

<sup>18</sup> Translated by del Valle 1988: 132-138 and Segal 2001: 134-142.

the filth of its body; and Desire, who spurs the soul to pursue happiness in this life and to enjoy its body. Intellect argues that there is hope for the soul as long as it frees itself from the yoke of Desire, and thus persuades soul to rely on the forgiveness of God. The story concludes with a self-praising poem by Hever, who adjudicates the debate, in a way, by impersonating the Heavenly Judge:

*I save the frail flesh from the cauldron's fire,  
the soul from the Pit's conflagration.  
The evil desire, the body in lust,  
are but straw or a smoking brand.  
Then happy the man who for Father takes God  
and is led by that Father's firm hand.  
He shall root from his heart transgression and sin,  
plant contrition and right in their place.  
Then shall he bask in Eternal Light  
and look on his Maker's face.*<sup>19</sup>

**1.3.** The third debate on this issue can be found in the *Sefer ha-Mešalim*, “Book of Tales,”<sup>20</sup> a collection of ten stories on different subjects, written around 1233 by Jacob ben Eleazar of Toledo – a grammarian, a translator, and a poet – following the formal techniques the *maqāma*. The first chapter is entitled “allegorical tale about the soul and the body.”<sup>21</sup> The main character is the fictional author-narrator, Lemuel ben Itiel, who is sometimes called by his real name, Jacob.<sup>22</sup> The poem is presented as a love story whose main characters are different parts of the narrator’s body: thus, his rational soul is portrayed as a passionate and temperamental young aristocrat; his intellect is the soul’s beloved, embodied by a handsome general. Wisdom appears as the general’s lover, and the heart (a metonym for the body) imprisons the soul and prevents it from joining its lover, the intellect.

The first scene is set outdoors, in a street frequented by, among others, “chariots of love”, troops of warriors, “and leading them all, the love of my soul, the general of an army *outstanding among ten thousand*” (*Song of Songs* 5:10). On seeing the narrator, all passers-by run to hug and kiss him, but his soul is plunged into a deep erotic dream in which he sees how “the sun hugs the moon.”

*[...] I was strolling down the avenues used by chariots of love and the chariots of love came down running, like armies of countless warriors, with banners and flags fluttering in the wind, and behind them, the chariots of love, one after the other, and at the head of all, the love of my soul, the general of the army, “outstanding among ten thousand” (Song of Songs 5:10).*

<sup>19</sup> Translation by Segal 2001: 142.

<sup>20</sup> David 1992/1993. The “Book of Tales” has not yet been translated in its entirety, but Spanish translations of some chapters are available: chapters 4 (Alba Cecilia 2008: 291-311), 6 (Díez Macho 1952: 39-45), and 7 (Navarro 1982).

<sup>21</sup> David 1992/1993: 15-22.

<sup>22</sup> For instance, in l. 77, in a quotation from *Genesis*.

*When they saw me, they ran to meet me, hugged me and kissed me and, then, my soul fell asleep. And it dreamed that the sun was hugging the heart of the moon [...]*

*And he sang his poem saying:*

*"I slept but my heart was awake" (Song of Songs 5:2)*

*And I heard the voice of my beloved calling me:*

*My beloved, wake up,*

*Come with your beloved and rest*

*When I heard it, my heart trembled,*

*"And could no longer control myself" (Ge 45:1)<sup>23</sup>*

This erotic dream of the soul makes the heart "angry and agitated in his chamber." Consequently, the heart locks up in this chamber both the soul and the narrator, so that they become invisible to the intellect, "the general of love".

In the next scene, the soul looks out the window "to see the deer, bright as the sun," and then, dressed in its finest clothes and accompanied by its maids, goes up to an upper chamber, where "the deer of his love" appears to it. While the soul is dazzled by the light of its lover's face, the lover gets angry at the soul for not having come to welcome it and have remained hidden, causing him great pain and anguish. Then the soul "prostrated itself to its lover, began to mourn and begged him saying" that it was the heart's fault and asks, "can, perchance, a man live without a heart?" (l. 60). However, the lover leaves, and the soul is left "shrouded in bitterness of separation."

In the third scene, the wily heart makes the soul believe that the narrator was the one who caused the separation of the lovers. The soul, therefore, refuses to talk to him. At this point, the narrator Jacob awakens from his sleep and implores the soul be reconciled with him "as is customary among humans"; but this offends the soul even further, as the soul considers itself far superior to man.

In the next scene, the heart, irritated by the arrogance of the soul, becomes the defender of the narrator. Heart admits the superiority of the soul, as well as its beauty and purity, but reminds it that:

*"If your origins and the origins of your origins are lofty, there are others that are loftier [...] and if you were not resting on your earthly body, you would be hidden [...] you are mine in the presence of God and I am your anointed; Why do you offend me and despise me?" (l. 100)*

Upon hearing this speech, the narrator takes the soul's side and accompanies it in its quest for the "general of love" who lives in the Garden of Delight, whose owner is Wisdom. The soul finally

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<sup>23</sup> All translations from the *Sefer ha-Mešalim* are the author's own.



joins the narrator, and the story concludes with the soul giving a philosophical speech on the creation of the world.

In this story the relationship between soul and body is presented in Neo-platonic terms, and expressed in the form of an erotic story with all the typical elements of the genre: a beautiful lady who hides from her beloved, rivals (heart, wisdom) that prevent the meeting of lovers, jealousy, anger, lust, crying... The purpose of the tale is, as the author himself states at the beginning of the chapter, to entertain the reader:

*I composed the story of the intellect / as a (tale) of love to amuse  
Now, read it and enjoy / its delights, which are plentiful!*

This idea is repeated in the poem that closes the story:

*The story of the intellect concludes here. / It was composed as a poem of love  
Think of it kindly, my friend, / and do not consider its defects.*

**1.4.** Among the debates between body and soul we should also include the work of Yom Tob Soriano, *Milhemet ha-ebaram* (“disputation between the members”).<sup>24</sup> There is little information on this author, whose name appears in the form of an acrostic in this poem. He seems to have lived in the fifteenth century in the city of Soria. Written in rhymed prose, the poem contains a dispute between members of the body (including the soul) who each tries to defend that its function is the most important. The soul participates in the dispute as one of the members of the body, not only because without soul there is no life, but also because soul is, just like them, responsible for the actions of humankind.

This debate shows many similarities with a midrash story in which the king of Persia, at the end of his days, sets off to find a drug that could keep him alive. After having overcome many an obstacle in his quest, all the members of his body, except the soul, argue over which one has contributed more to the success of the enterprise. In the end, language is the winner.<sup>25</sup>

In Soriano’s debate, the members of the human body, aware of its value and virtue, start a debate to determine which one is superior and should therefore be recognized by the others as the lord of all of them. The head, hands, heart, legs and soul speak in turn. In the end, God intervenes declaring His omnipotence; He is the creator of all beings, who orders their death and can resuscitate them. All the body members unanimously declare that God is their Lord.

<sup>24</sup> Haberman 1936 and van Bakkum 1991: 89.

<sup>25</sup> *Midrash Tehillim* to Psalms 39:2, see Haberman 1936 and van Bakkum 1991: 89.

## II.2 Debates between Arms and Letters

One the most common types of debates in Medieval Arabic literature is the debate between Arms and Letters.<sup>26</sup> In medieval Spanish Hebrew literature, this type of debate is represented by three major works: two of them are sections of larger works, whereas another is an independent composition. The earliest example of a debate between the arms and the letters in Spain can be found in the *Risalat al Sayf wa-l-Qalam* (Epistle on Sword and Pen), composed by Cordoban poet Ahmad ibn Burd al-Asgar around 1040.<sup>27</sup> The introductory verses stress the importance of both arms and letters:

*Because sword and pen<sup>28</sup> are two torches that guide him who, in the middle of the night, pursues glory, and two ladders leading to the stars for him who seeks the highest honors [...] they rivaled in praising themselves and sought merit, disputing it with haughtiness and pretending each that its arrow was the winning one.<sup>29</sup>*

Sword and Pen present arguments based on antitheses: Pen represents the truth against the injustice of Sword, justice against its violence, Pen's humble origins against Sword's noble cradle; Pen's nudity (the bare cane) against the luxurious garments (sheath, precious stones) of Sword. In sum, the intellectual, internal strength of writing is opposed to the physical, external strength of the sword, each representing one social class competing for preeminence: poets and court scribes against rulers and soldiers.

The debate ends in a draw: it is ruled that the two contenders are equally important for the good governance of the court, so they regain their sanity and stop fighting. "What an ugly thing is that our affects walk apart and our ideas are discordant, when God had united us in such noble friendship!" They then unite to sing the praises of king Muyahid of Denia, an accomplished soldier and patron of literature:

*He has put us both on the same footing in his days of war and peace, and with you he has gone beyond peace and with me beyond violence, and he did not spare you until he had attained his desire and did not neglect me until he found his love.*

**2.1.** Chapter XL of Yehudah al Harizi's *Sefer Tahkemoni* is a "Battle of Sword and Pen for Mastery of Men."<sup>30</sup> This time, the scene is set at the home of the narrator Heman the Ezraḥite, who tells

<sup>26</sup> See the seminal study by van Gelder 1987.

<sup>27</sup> A translation and study can be found in de la Granja 1976: 3-44.

<sup>28</sup> Already in the early Abbasid era, literary praises of the pen started to gain popularity. Andalusian poets incorporated many of their images into their own compositions. I. Levin collects and translates fragments of the major Arab poets from the ninth and tenth centuries such as Abu Tamam and Al Mutanabbi in Levin 1977 (in Hebrew).

<sup>29</sup> The following translations from the *Risalat al Sayf wa-l-Qalam* are based on the translation of de la Granja 1976: 3-44.

<sup>30</sup> del Valle 1988: 263-266 and Segal 2001: 302-306 (the latter is followed here).

how, in a night of insomnia, he received the visit a traveler dressed in rags, whom he recognized as his “teacher and friend” Hēver the Kenite. Having Hēver eaten everything that was served, he started to recite poems: “now when he could gorge no more, he began to display his wisdom’s store,” whereupon the narrator “seized scroll and pen to set his baubles down.” But, as soon as he starts writing, his pen breaks twice, so he throws it away. Hēver then berates him to treat so a blessed object, chosen by God, and begins to tell a story in which the scribes of the king and the generals of his armies discuss their respective preeminence. After a verbal dispute between them, the objects themselves (the pen and the sword) take the floor and start praising themselves and mocking the rival:

*Then the Sword and Pen spoke, giving stroke for stroke. Said the Sword, I am the warrior’s might and creed, eagle and lion I feed. (...) Then the Pen answered, saying, I am the prophet who dwells in Wisdom’s tent, Jacob upright and excellent: he who clasps me tight grasps true delight.*<sup>31</sup>

The arguments pleaded by either litigant are not entirely new. In fact, as mentioned above, the author, Judah Al Harizi, had translated the *maqāmas* of Al Hariri of Basra and was well versed in Arabic language and culture. Consequently, he uses many of the literary images that had previously been introduced by Hispanic Arabic poets, such as the strength of the sword and the terror it inspires, and the humble beginnings and fragility of pen. All this is, however, furnished with a generous amount of Biblical quotations.

As was the case of the *Risala* of Ibn Burd, there is no clear outcome in the present poem, although the superiority of the pen seem to be implied in its last plea. The narrator intervenes after pen’s last speech, praising his friend’s eloquence and copying his words down with a pen, thus closing the debate.

**2.2.** Pen is also the winner of the debate between Pen and Sword in the fourth chapter of the *Sefer ha-Mešalim* of Jacob ben Eleazar, entitled “[Debate between Pen and Sword], the Sword is defeated and listens to questions of ethics and philosophy from the mouth of the pen.”<sup>32</sup>

This text is a composition of about two hundred lines in rhymed prose with intercalated poems. It has three clearly differentiated parts: the first is an allegorical introduction that situates the story in an age where “the generation of fools grew and multiplied,” to the extent that it cornered Wisdom. Wisdom had to remain hidden in caves until a new king, named “eloquent prophet,” a lover of the sciences and poetry, rose to the throne, restored wisdom, and persecuted

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<sup>31</sup> Translation from Segal 2001: 304.

<sup>32</sup> Translation and study in Alba Cecilia 2008: 291-314.

the fools. The narrator, who is the protagonist of the events, describes his encounter with Wisdom, a young maiden “who knows no man,” and whom he marries.

The second part of the poem, which contains the actual discussion, is introduced rather abruptly: “When Wisdom went to the study house in the company of her husband [...] she saw two men fighting.” These two men will be the main characters of the *maqāma*: “one was a brave warrior; his face was like a lion’s, he wore a sword fastened to his hips.” The other had nothing but a humble cane in his hand; however, he accepted the warrior’s challenge. These two contestants are immediately replaced by instruments that represent them, and which start praising their own virtues. The arguments presented by the pen follow closely the topics and motifs introduced by the previous generations of poets, and in particular by Yehudah Al-Harizi. Thus, the sword mocks the pen for its humble origins and for its weakness:

*How can the pen boast among the reeds, if it is just the same? [...] Once uprooted, it loses its scent, consistency and green color, and becomes yellow and negligible. If it is not sharpened, its body swells like a wineskin; it is thanks to the sword, who sharpens its tip, that it has a heart.*<sup>33</sup>

The pen, on the other hand, defends itself from these attacks by accepting its humble cradle and reproaching the sword for its lack of wisdom and for its origins:

*If I tell you how you were born, that will not contribute to your glory: remember your birth, and do not forget: iron comes from dust.*

Sword then boasts of its strength:

*A sword is the ornament of kings, the servant of the princes and the protector of the wanderers; it revives the one who wields it and is aid against its enemies; if my enemies pay no attention to me, they will be chopped off.*

Pen reproaches the violence and injustice that Sword brings and urges it to learn from Pen’s words. Pen recites a poem, the final one, which convinces Sword:

*I am strong and have marks of my strength,  
My enemy is terrified by my mouth’s saliva,  
Because, though low in height, is it not true that  
The edge of my mouth reaches to the far corners of the country?  
I am Wisdom, I dwell together with Cunning;  
My mouth will reveal to you hidden secrets  
And will inform you of what was before,  
But what will happen, I do not know.*

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<sup>33</sup> Translations are the author’s own.

Sword then declares itself defeated and asks to be instructed by Pen.

Here begins the text's third part, which consists of some sort of philosophical-theosophical treatise on the unicity of God and on His qualities. These qualities are explained by Pen, who humbly recognizes that God alone is the owner of true Wisdom. The debate ends with Sword's acknowledgment that Wisdom is superior to everything else, since, as Qohelet states, *Wisdom makes one wise person more powerful than ten rulers in a city* (Qo 7:19) and *Wisdom is better than weapons of war* (Qo 9:18).

**2.3.** The third exemplar of the debates between Pen and Sword considered here is Sem Tob Arduziel's *Debate between Pen and Scissors*,<sup>34</sup> one of the works that the famous author of *Moral Proverbs*, Don Santo de Carrión, composed in Hebrew. It dates to the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and is different from all previous Hebrew debates in that it is an independent unit, and not part of a larger work. It was composed following the same literary technique of the above-discussed poems, i.e. in rhymed prose with intercalated poems. The text is written in first person, as an autobiography, whence its secondary title: *Ma'ase ha-Rav* (Tale of the Rabbi). For this reason, some scholars have interpreted it as an allegorical story related to the socio-political context of author's time.<sup>35</sup> The debate is divided into four parts:

1. Debate between the author and his pen.
2. Dialogue between the author and the scissors
3. Debate between scissors and pen
4. Denouement in the presence of a judge.

The action is set in the author's home, on "a cold winter day" in which everyone remains locked in their houses. In the absence of friends with whom to chat, he decides to spend the day writing and starts to compose a eulogy of Pen, in which he compares it with the staff of Moses, "whoever has pen and ink has enough, since they are worth more than all peers." Many of the images in praise of the pen were already classic in the Andalusian poems: "it knows my thoughts without me revealing them and shapes them; it hears every secret without having ears; it perceives everything hidden without having eyes."<sup>36</sup> But there are also some new and highly complex images, such as the comparison of a paper with a valley and the pen with the cloven hooves of an ox plowing it: "with its footsteps it traces a path, plowing the paper as a valley with its foot, like the cloven hoof

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<sup>34</sup> Nini & Fruchtman 1980.

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, Shepard 1978, Colahan 1979, Einbinder 1994, and Zackin 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Nini & Fruchtman 1980: 41-42.

of an ox.”<sup>37</sup> This image of the cloven hoof evokes, on the one hand, the tip of the pen, split in two; on the other, it is a clear reference to animals that, according to the Bible, are ritually clean.

In order to write down these praises of the pen, the author tries to wet the tip in the ink, but the ink is frozen and the pen gets blunt. This causes a debate between the author and his pen, whom the author accuses of being a traitor and ungrateful for having abandoned him after having been so generously praised:

*Is this my reward for having honored you, and for having called you the rod of the Lord, for having praised you seven times a day, for having given to you the highest and most noble praise of mouth and tongue? [...] Where is the rock that you penetrated? For is it not said that “a soft tongue breaketh the bone?” (Proverbs 25: 15) And Moses, did he not stretch forth his hand and raise it up to strike twice with his rod, and did “he not cleave the rock and did not the waters gush out?” (Isaiah 48:21) But you turned back in the face of soaked chaff. What would you have done against resistance? Your teeth bit into absorbent cotton and your vigor fled from you. “If thou goest limp in the day of need thy strength is small indeed” (Deuteronomy 34:7) And my complaint be upon my soul and my violence upon my head because I chose you from among all my friends and companions to be daily delight. You put my hopes to shame, and now you offer me naught but vain emptiness. This is the reward of one who abandons the cyprus and seeks refuge under a worthless bramble. “The staff upon which I lean is a broken reed” (Isaiah 36:6).<sup>38</sup>*

Pen responds to the author’s accusations and invites him to press hard into the inkwell with his finger; however, when he does so, he gets hurt.

In the second section, which begins at this point,<sup>39</sup> the author appears silent, staring out the window of his room: he has lost all hope of spending that day pleasantly writing. Suddenly, he hears a voice urging him to cut out letters and thus compose a text. Then a dialogue begins between the author and his scissors, who praise themselves. The author is pleased to have found a substitute for the pen and decides to use the scissors. After he does so, the scissors begin to boast, despising pen and ink, and initiate their own debate, in which the sword —a representative of the noble warrior — is replaced by the humble, though arrogant, scissors.<sup>40</sup>

Scissors boast of the magnificence of the letters produced by them, whereas the work of Pen is as superficial as the colors it produces. Pen pleads its case against Scissors, which, it claims, are very useful to shear and cut hair and nails, but useless for writing for its slowness: “Before concluding a word, one has already forgotten the beginning!”; “While you write a line, I can write

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<sup>37</sup> Nini & Fruchtman 1980: 45.

<sup>38</sup> Nini & Fruchtman 1980: 46-47. Translation from Shepard 1978: 82, 89-90.

<sup>39</sup> Nini & Fruchtman 1980: 53-60.

<sup>40</sup> Nini & Fruchtman 1980: 61-72.

the books of Daniel and Ezra!”<sup>41</sup> Whereas in the debates of Sword and Pen, Pen typically reproaches Sword for the violence it exerts on men; in this debate, Pen reproaches Scissors for the violence they exert on the paper, which is destroyed beyond repair. Pen claims to slide affectionately on the paper’s surface, touching only a part of it.

To end the discussion, Pen suggests that they seek an impartial judge who can rank all household utensils by their usefulness.<sup>42</sup> The judge thus decides on the outcome, a rare fact in debates of Semitic origin, but quite frequent in the Castilian debates. The judge puts each instrument in its proper place: he writes with the pen and cuts nails, beard and mustache with the scissors. The triumph of the pen is total, as well as the defeat of the scissors, who are unable to speak. To celebrate his victory pen throws a party “in honor of the day in which the Lord saved him from the hands of its enemies.”

The debate ends with the intervention of the narrator, no longer as a fictional character, but as the author Sem Tob ben Isaac, who claims to have composed this satire in the month of Tammuz of the year 5105 (July 1345).<sup>43</sup> At the beginning of the poem the author had already explained his intention to compose a work with cutout letters “with the blade of a sword with two edges,” and had highlighted the beauty of these letters, “more beautiful than brocades and garlands, and than the most beautiful girls.”

## II.3 Debates on various topics

**3.1. Wine and Water:** In Yosef ben Meir ibn Zabarra’s *Sefer Sa’asu’im* (“Book of Delight”)<sup>44</sup> (Barcelona, 12<sup>th</sup> century) there is a debate between two diners on the excellences of water and wine (chapter I). After having attacked each other, they reach a compromise: both are good; “A little is helpful, but much is harmful.”

Chapter XXVII of *Sefer Tahkemoni* is a “Praise and reproach of wine”;<sup>45</sup> the narrator, tired of leading an abstemious life, joins a group of young drinkers who praise wine. An old man berates them for not having mentioned the best qualities of the wine, and begins to praise wine himself for its color, its flavor, the effects that it produces and even the glass from which it is drunk. The young people encourage him to go on further and list negative aspects of wine. He complies so well that

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<sup>41</sup> Nini & Fruchtman 1980: 63.

<sup>42</sup> Nini & Fruchtman 1980: 73-76.

<sup>43</sup> Nini & Fruchtman 1980: 76.

<sup>44</sup> Forteza Rey 1983: 67-70. A translation and commentary of the book, with a selection of texts, can be found in Abrahams 1912: 9-61 and Schippers 1999

<sup>45</sup> Segal 2001: 233-237 (“Of the Cup’s Joys and Other Allows”).

“cups were emptied with assiduity as many swore off wine in perpetuity.”<sup>46</sup> When the narrator asks the old man his name, he immediately recognizes his old friend Hever the Kenite.

**3.2. Poetry and Prose:** Mose Ibn Ezra (11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> centuries) mentions in his work on poetics some Arabic disputations that dealt with the superiority of poetry over prose.<sup>47</sup> In the second chapter of the *Sefer ha-Mešalim* of Jacob ben Eleazar there is a dispute between poetry and prose, “About the qualities of both, which ends with the victory of the poet.”<sup>48</sup> The poem begins with a discussion at a meeting of lawyers: one defends prose and accuses poetry of being based on lies and stupidity; another praises poetry and its rules. Seeing himself defeated, the defender of the prose leaves the meeting.

**3.3. Wisdom and Wealth** (*Milhemetha-Hokhma we-ha-‘oser*) by Yehudah ibn Sabbetay (late 12<sup>th</sup> century), it is a satirical work written in 1214 in honor of Todros ha-Levi Abulafia of Burgos; it discusses the advantages and qualities of wisdom and wealth, which are alternatively presented by two knights.<sup>49</sup>

**3.4. Dispute between Winter and Summer:** a poem by Abraham ibn Ezra (1092-1167)<sup>50</sup> appears to be the oldest text that addresses this issue.

**3.5. Day and Night:** This is the title of the XXXIX *maqāma* of Al Harizi’s *Tahkemoni*;<sup>51</sup> the narrator sets the scene at the Biblical place of Rimmon Peretz at a meeting of scholars, in which one of them, who turns out to be the narrator’s friend Hever, tells how, during the summer solstice, Day “put on the cloak of pride and did the Night deride.”<sup>52</sup> After discussion between the two, Night recognizes the superiority of Day.

**3.6. Old and Young Man (or Religion and Philosophy).** I will refer, in the last place, to one of the “dialogues” that appear in the apologetic work of Yishaq ben Yosef Pulgar (first half of 14<sup>th</sup> century), entitled *Ezer ha-Dat* (“The Support of Faith”). As in the previous examples, Pulgar uses also rhymed prose.<sup>53</sup> In the second treatise of the work, he deals with the subject, by then already old, of how to harmonize Philosophy and Faith. This topic takes the shape of a debate between an

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<sup>46</sup> Segal 2001: 237.

<sup>47</sup> Abumalham Mas 1985/1986: II 67-70.

<sup>48</sup> David 1992/1993: 23-27.

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<sup>50</sup> It is poem No. 122 of Abraham ibn Ezra’s ‘Diwan’ (see van Bekkum 1991). See the edition in ###.

<sup>51</sup> Segal 2001: 298-301 (“The Debate of Day and Night: Whose the Greater Might and Delight”).

<sup>52</sup> Segal 2001: 298. See also del Valle 1988: 260-262.

<sup>53</sup> Levinger 1984. See Haliva 2015.



old man, representing the traditional religion, and a young man, a philosopher. The narrator sets the scene on a journey that he undertakes with the aim of finding the truth. After leaving his city, “the wind carries him on its wings to Jerusalem.” Walking through the streets of the city, he sees a crowd gathered around two individuals: a tall old man, wrapped in his prayer shawl, and a handsome young man, whose “countenance shone like pearls, his complexion like roses and whose lips were of a beautiful red color.” Both discuss life after death (*Olam ha-ba*): in the old man’s opinion, such life is reserved to him who observes the Torah’s commandments, and it is not attainable for heretics who, like the young man, read books of Greek philosophy and other non-Jewish works. The young man replies angrily by mocking his opponent’s lack of intelligence despite his advanced age. According to him, religion does not give wisdom, but serves a social need: it is necessary for the safety of the community, while philosophy alone aims to discover truth. As here seems to be no clear winner, and the discussion heats up, with continuous insults from the young to the old man, the community decides to go to the king of Israel and to ask him to intervene and pronounce a verdict. The solution is conciliatory: “both paths are needed to reach perfection: the religious observance and theoretical knowledge. Wisdom cannot exist outside of the Torah. A religious person without philosophy in his soul is lost because, as the Mishnah says (*Abbot* 2:5), the ignorant (*‘am ha-arets*) cannot be just (*hasid*); the Torah is therefore a prelude and a preparation for bringing the intellect from potential to action, and for joining it and joining [the Active Intellect]. All who rise to this level shall reach eternity, and this is the afterlife (*Olam ha-ba*).”

I would like to conclude stressing once again the idea that, although Spanish Hebrew debates, especially those from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, follow the topics and formal conventions of Arabic debates, their dependence on Hebrew models is also clear. This Hebrew identity stems, first, from the frequent insertion of Biblical and Rabbinic quotations. Secondly, it comes from the clear dependence of the poetic imagery upon the texts’ Jewish religious context. This adaptation is particularly clear in Sem Tob de Carrion’s “Debate between the Pen and the Scissors,” riddled with images from and references to Rabbinical *Halakha* and *Haggada*.

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